

Title: Social Engagement: A Multi Generational Vision
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Contact: Mollie Parsons/ Jane Newsome
Phone: (617) 423-0401 Email: min@generationsinc.org

Social Engagement: A Multigenerational Social Vision

The Massachusetts Intergenerational Network and the participants in this conference believe strongly in the interdependency of the generations and the ability of all generations to contribute positively to our society and world. Social engagement through multigenerational volunteerism can play a positive role in the lives of older adults if we create opportunities that meet the special needs of these populations, creating opportunities for all individuals to easily participate in public service. As the demographics of our country shift with the aging and retiring of the baby boomers, we must consider the effects of this change on our communities and society at large. Already there have been documented declines in multigenerational interactions and civic engagement in general. (Putnam, 2000) As families are spread across states and various generations are increasingly isolated from one another, we must make the effort to prevent these chasms from splintering communities. This can be done through the promotion of intergenerational interactions. We are currently on the verge of seeing 80 million individuals enter retirement. What will they do as they leave the workforce? How will they continue to contribute to our society? How will this affect the state of our communities? Will it bring increased fragmentation, or can these individuals help bridge some of the gaps that have recently emerged? Many of the answers to these questions will depend on what frameworks are created in the next few years, allowing this population the opportunity to fully participate in our communities. If we hope to promote healthy communities we must establish and support values that lead to multi-generational volunteerism.

Recently, a number of governmental programs have begun to reshape the landscape of volunteer options open to older adults. These include the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, the Foster Grandparents Program, and the Senior Companion Program, all part of the Senior Corps Program. However, as the number of retired individuals increases, it is important to be proactive in ensuring that all those who wish to volunteer their time are provided with ample opportunity to do so.

Potential Rewards of Multigenerational Volunteerism

Multigenerational volunteerism leads to multiple benefits across the generations. Older adult volunteer service has been linked with improved health, mental acuity, mobility, and increased overall engagement in the world. (Sullivan, 2002) Older adults can also learn from associating with younger generations, often resulting in changed perceptions of what young people represent. This is reflected in the research completed by Zeldin (2001), discussing the impact of making intergenerational decisions within organizations. Through close contact over an extended time, adults began to have more confidence in the abilities and integrity of young people. The trend of breaking down stereotypes was also noticed by Lohman (2003) through her study of repeated intergenerational interactions through book clubs. After spending time with different age groups, individuals noted that their personal views about other generations became less biased and more open.

Older adults have long been considered important resources in various cultures around the world. As Raudenbush and Hall discuss in their 2001 article, older adults provide our communities with a wealth of experience, understanding, and links to our cultural history. The time that older adults spend with children can be enormously important in youths' development as conscious members of society. Spending time with these volunteers helps the children "look beyond themselves, replacing a preoccupation with self... with a concern for unknown individuals, the environment, and even the world of ideas." (Freeman and King, 2001, p. 212)

Service is one of the most powerful ways of forging bonds between generations, once again helping young people understand their place in their community and the larger world. Encouraging individuals of various ages to come together and understand one another increases the possibility of intergenerational connectedness and fosters the reciprocity of the generations by questioning attitudes that pits the generations against each other. Through relationship building between individuals it is possible to create communities that come together to solve problems jointly. One concern raised by Sullivan (2002) is how an aging population will impact school funding. If older adults have no connections to younger generations, they have little or no incentive to assist in the education of children. (Sullivan, 2002, p. 3) However, if generational gaps are bridged, there is a sense that the wellbeing and future of children is important to members of older generations. This will be especially important as older individuals make up an ever increasing percentage of the voting population.

It is in the hands of older individuals to decide the future of our communities and society. Young people currently have little or no voice in the political structure of our country. They need caring adults to ensure that their future is secure and optimistic. The dependence of youth on adults, as discussed by Zeldin (2001), can become more of a partnership through relationship building. Although many adults, through pressures of work and family, are unable to provide the time necessary to build these relationships, retired older adults have one of the most precious resources at their disposal: time. As discussed by Kazemek et al (2002), building strong intergenerational relationships is an intensive process; individuals who are entering into retirement frequently are in possession of more unscheduled hours during their days.

Priority Issue 1: Redefining Volunteerism for a Diverse, Multigenerational Nation

Issue: If it is imperative for all individuals to participate in multigenerational volunteerism, it is also vitally important to craft a language that is inclusive of all cultures, economic backgrounds, ages, ethnicities, educational histories and personal differences that are so prevalent in our richly diverse country.

Barriers: Currently the word "volunteer" carries with it a complex history and meaning. Frequently it is associated with white, middle- to upper-class, unpaid women. Often the duties of volunteers are seen to be folding fliers in a back room or leading social events. Because of this limited connotation, individuals working in the field of community service have noted the negative reaction to this label of prospective "volunteers" who do not fit this narrow definition. Because there is a lack of understanding of the possible power a volunteer can have, both on the part of many

organizations and that of potential volunteers, this important source of experience and energy is easily lost.

Solutions: A systematic effort needs to be made to change the current understanding of who a volunteer is and what this individual can accomplish. This new definition needs to take into account the multi-faceted population of our country; it needs to include various:

- Genders
- Ethnicities/cultures
- Different generations of children, youth and young adults
- Different generations of “older adults” including
 - Frail elders
 - Mobile older adults
 - Independent older adults
 - Baby Boomers
- Economic differences
- Urban/Suburban/Rural
- Languages
- Varying individual interests

A systematic effort must be made through media and other venues to increase public awareness of the importance of Multigenerational service programs across the generations. Only after all of the possible partners are invited to participate in volunteer opportunities can we say that the definition has truly changed. Volunteer organizations need to take into account the needs as well as the abilities of various ages. Engaging local and state intergenerational coalitions around common community concerns would be one way to include the voices of all our citizens. Frail elders, although not usually independently mobile, can still offer much to our society. In order to redefine volunteerism all individuals need to be respected as productive members of our communities, and valued for what they bring to the table.

Priority Issue 2: Structuring volunteer programs to tap the diverse needs of all ages of potential volunteers especially boomers and older adults

Issue: It is important for the host organization to broaden the concept of what a volunteer or an older adult is able to take on.

Barriers: Many organizations structure volunteer positions based on outmoded definitions of ‘volunteer’ which doesn’t match with the attitudes, schedules, and the leadership, skills and talents of older adults. These organizations also struggle with the management of volunteers. They are uncertain about what roles these individuals can play in such a way as to maximize their existing skill-set. Additionally, there are still too few “model” organizations that provide a wide array of opportunities

Solutions: By creating a variety of roles and responsibilities in which all volunteers in community service organizations can participate, groups will be able to attract a wider variety of individuals willing to volunteer. Some roles might include leadership positions, management positions, supervision, direct service, support staff, office assistance, and financial management. In order to create a friendly environment, the situation must be kept informal and flexible, avoiding large quantities of bureaucratic rules and regulations, while still providing significant guidance and support. Discovering the passions, skills and talents of the potential volunteer and creating opportunities that match these can be an extremely effective way of placing an individual.

A large, well publicized database matching volunteers with organizations needing specific skills would help bring together the individual and the position. It might also be beneficial to create a national list providing links to best practices and model programs, a resource for organizations looking to improve or expand their programming.

Programs can be institutionalized on school, university and community levels and current programs can be expanded. In order to allow for successful programs to continue to grow, funding sources will also need to increase. An alternate source of financial support would be to promote corporate sponsorship of employee community service, encouraging employers to credit volunteer work.

Priority Issue 3: Transportation

Issue: In order for individuals to volunteer their time, they must be able to reach the site at which their services are needed. Although this seems obvious, it is frequently an unmet need, thus making transportation a priority issue for organizations working with populations having limited independent mobility, namely older adults and youth.

Barriers: Older adults are sometimes limited in their mobility for a number of reasons. Many are unable to drive, either due to a physical or mental limitation or a lack of a vehicle. Although some older adults have access to public transportation, in many areas this resource is difficult for them to access and is often undependable. In some areas, such as Boston, which have a service dedicated to transportation for older adults and others with limited mobility, many of those using this service are dissatisfied with the quality and punctuality of the current system. Individuals are periodically subjected to two hour delays, which can lead to missed volunteer opportunities. After repeated negative transportation experiences volunteers can become discouraged with the system, ultimately resulting in some individuals quitting due to preventable logistical issues.

In response to the needs of volunteers, some organizations have tried to arrange their own transportation solutions. However, due to the high costs of purchasing, upkeep, gas, and liability insurance most of these plans have proved unsustainable. Currently, there is an enormous need for a large-scale solution to this complex problem.

Solutions: One of the first steps in solving this growing crisis should be a comprehensive study of the changing transportation needs of the shifting older adult population in various urban, suburban,

and rural areas. Non-profits and other volunteer organizations working with older adult populations need low cost alternatives to the current system. An extensive national survey of the issue would help illuminate what can be done to alleviate the problem before the Baby Boomers begin to face pressing questions of how to remain mobile.

Although ultimate solutions to this issue will need to be developed over time, some possible solutions might include: offering taxi-vouchers to volunteers; in communities with a high population density, fixed route options specifically for older adults and others with special needs might help alleviate some transportation issues; reimbursing individuals for travel directly associated with volunteer service might also encourage people to help develop their own transportation needs; encouraging communities that have a high need for transportation solutions to provide networking options for the local citizens might also help in the short term. This might allow local individuals to come together to share resources, and perhaps even share the cost of a communal vehicle, such as the Zipcar model. These are just a beginning of a list of possible solutions that will hopefully result from a comprehensive study on the topic.

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